

Summer in Calcutta: A Feministic, Autobiographical and Psychoanalytical discussion of Kamala Das

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze the feminist tones in the poetry of Indian-English writer and poet, Kamala Das, particularly focusing on the expression and problematization of gender roles in her 1965 poetry collection, *Summer in Calcutta*. It argues that her gendered identity manifests itself in her poetic style and aesthetic, wherein she questions the patriarchal expectations of gender – of women rooted in immanence and domesticity and of men rooted in transcendence and the public sphere. The custom of arranged marriage, domestic emotional abuse, confinement to the private sphere of domesticity, and daunting standards of feminine beauty, are some of the gendered expectations in the Indian woman's experience that Das' poetry interrogates. The various themes that include feminine approach, man-woman relationships, Love, lust and different threads of human life which bind two opposite sexes in one relationship. This journey in her works depicts all sensory experiences which have a definite bridge between man and woman. Her writing is not only a reflection of the real society but her work gives insight knowledge of man-woman relationships' psychology also.

KEYWORDS: gender roles, confessional poetry, domesticity, lust, feminist

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das was born in 1934 at Punneyakutu which resides in South Malabar. V.M Nair, a journalist and Balamani Amma, a poetess were both delighted when a fantabulous author, Kamala Das was born under their roof. The sin of child marriage in early India paused the higher education of Kamala Das at the age of 15 but she was able to receive primary education from Convent School of Calcutta. Kamala Das was so precise in the work that she published only four volumes of poetry in English which were *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, *The Only Playhouse* and *Other Poems* and *Only the Soul Know How to Sing*. Kamala Das is a path breaking post-independent poet whose poetry created ripples among the existent placid corpus of conventional Indian poetry. Her poems parted from the unadventurous traditional Indian poetry with confessional shades of physical love. *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) poetically presents her sincere autobiographical exploration of womanhood and love coupled with eroticism. Encumbered love is no love. Her poems depict the

complexity of life and selfhood. Poems, in this collection, traverses beyond the story of erotic sex and physical love to explicate the entangled self, its conflicting emotions and desires, the effort to self-revelation and self-assertion, the pain of frustration, despair, humiliation and the depression caused by the state of being not loved and further.

Major Thrust

Simon de Beauvoir in her famous work *The Second Sex* (1949) points out that men are capable of Stereotyping and mystifying women. Patriarchy is strengthened because of the stereotyping and mystification. She argued that women are also responsible for their own plight as they accepted these stereotypical roles silently. She further claims that women are always treated as negative of men, where men are ideal, the norm and women the deviant of others. She questions the status and gender role of woman in traditional society. *Summer in Calcutta* is one of those poems of Kamala Das in which she not only reminisces the summer spent in Calcutta, but

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compares with the summer felt within bodily with the internal twitches working at the dark consciousness level. Though we call her a feminist writer, confessional and autobiographical, so candid and frank in expression, but she is erotic, obscene, pornographic, sexual and bodily too at the same time as she cannot without talking about sex and sexual love, physical satisfaction and the quenching of the lust. The summer is hot and blazing no doubt, but she too is hot. The heat of the summer not, but of the body lets it not the poetic persona to be quiet. Something is corroding her psychologically and physically and the poetic female persona seems to be crawling after that gratification. *Sambhoga to Samadhi* seems to be the philosophy of the poetess. The things of the dark consciousness are the main properties of her poetry. Summer siestas full of sweating and heat aggravate sexual love and affection. She is very frivolous and naughty as she plays with double meaning speaking in overtones and undertones. *Summer in Calcutta* is not the summer of Calcutta, but the summer feeling of Kamala, who is just after sensuality, madly after love, man-woman relationship. Her summer is one of the bodily summer in which the protagonists act emotionally and abnormally, going after the sun. The gulmohars blooming in summer do not have anything to tempt and charm Kamala, but the summer of the body, the twitches and intrigues of it during the noontime siesta. Sweating and kissing and relishing upon is the thing of deliberation. To put it ironically, the April sun is like an orange and Kamala after squeezing it taking a glass of orange juice. She is a sexist and her poetry an exercise in sexual enterprise; the dreams of sex and love are bound to give pleasure to anybody else who goes through it. Kamala has fallen into a bad company of lovers, readers and critics.

Summer in Calcutta, begins with the poem, "*The Dance Of the Eunuchs*", which has an ironical tone and temper of the whole volume. "*The Dance of the*" reveals, through an external and familiar situation, the poet's inner anguish and unfulfilled desire. Writing about eunuchs, she symbolically depicts the state of suppressed class of people in a society. The poet herself being the victim of patriarchal society talks about transgenders who are also a victim of the social norms. The poet is the victim of the society like the eunuchs. The women are also treated as sub-humans. Like transgenders, women has to please her husband and in-laws. She has to smile without joy, work without stopping and to quench the sexual desire of her husband without enjoying herself. Therefore, Kamala Das states that status of women in society is no better than that of transgenders. The next poem, "*The Freaks*" is about the loveless marital

relationship of the poet, in it the female persona tries to unburden her heart. Her husband, is attracted only towards her outward appearance but is unable to enjoy the inner beauty of her soul. It depicts the agony of female persona, who remains a non-participant in the act of love-making because it denies her the emotional and intellectual thrills of life. Another poem, "*In Love*", goes on with the same issue of lust voyeurism shown by her husband. She wonders whether she should call her sexual experience 'love'. She meditates on the fact that there is no room for love where lust prevails. Her husband neglects her feelings whenever they meet. She again remains silent while he enjoys triumphantly. "*In Winter*" again carries the symbol of the warmth of sexual act. Her soul again gropes for roots in his body. The physical desire devoid of love is also seen in her poem, '*A Relationship*'. In this poem, the poet boldly claims that it was her desire that made him male and beautiful.

Conclusion

Kamala Das, in my opinion, possesses a strong sense of modernism. She writes with a defiant spirit, challenging outdated traditions and norms. She protests against the custom-ridden and conventional society dominated by men, as does every modernist who is a rebel. *Summer in Calcutta* as a poem takes us to the highest pedestal of thinking in bringing closer to women studies, human rights and violations, freedom of speech and expression, gender bias and equality, feminism and psychoanalysis. It is a poem of revolt and rebellion, feminist movement against patriarchy, male domination and bodily possession. Kamala Das also seeks to question and challenge the heteronormative institution of marriage in the Indian context, which is abusive and oppressive to women. The kind of language she uses in this confessional-rebellious form of poetry is a statement in itself. Language, to her, is not just a means of expression, but it becomes an important tool in challenging the language of men, oppressors and patriarchy. Love, on the other hand, is often packaged as an idea that pertains to the male gaze by falsifying and fetishising the entire idea of womanhood. When Kamala Das talks about 'every man' as an oppressor in her poems, she doesn't mean all men as individuals are toxic. She believes that men, are symbols of patriarchy and have reinforced certain binaries and stereotypes that oppress women.

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